



Primary teachers' attitudes, intentions and practices regarding formative assessment



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HIGHLIGHTS

- The TPB model was used to explain teachers' FA intentions and practices.
- Instrumental attitude, subjective norm, and self-efficacy predict FA intentions.
- Affective attitude and controllability do not predict FA intentions.
- The TPB components are not effective predictors of FA practices.
- Contextual factors should be considered when examining FA practices.

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to explore the relationships among teachers' attitudes, intentions, and practices regarding formative assessment under the framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour. A total of 450 teachers from 10 primary schools were surveyed. Teachers' responses to the scales were calibrated using Rasch analysis and then subjected to path analysis. Instrumental attitude, subjective norm, and self-efficacy were significant predictors of teachers' intentions to conduct formative assessment. However, the TPB components were not effective predictors of teachers' formative assessment practices. Teachers' awareness of formative assessment was articulated and implications for teacher training as well as further studies were discussed.

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1. Introduction

It is a well-received notion that school assessments serve two major purposes: summative and formative. Given that both purposes have their own irreplaceable functions in education, a dilemma faced by many teachers is how to reconcile the role of summative and formative assessments in teaching. In many examination-oriented education systems, an often-heard claim is

that the pressure in schools to improve students' achievement in high-stakes summative examinations precludes the use of formative assessment (William, Lee, Harrison, & Black, 2004).

Given that the first and foremost purpose of assessment in education is to support learning (Black & William, 2006), the high status of formative assessment is reflected in recent documents regarding Hong Kong's educational reform. The Curriculum Development Council (CDC, 2001) has urged a change in assessment practices to a system in which schools place more emphasis on formative assessment, making the latter an integral part of classroom teaching. CDC and the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority (CDC & HKEAA, 2007) also recommended that formative assessment should be given more attention and have a higher status than summative assessment due to its compelling educative functions. However, this top-down reform initiative relating to assessment is vulnerable as it ignores the role of teachers (Rink & Mitchell, 2002) and deficient teacher cooperation, knowledge, or beliefs (Brown, Hui, Yu, & Kennedy, 2011). It is

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evident that successful educational reform relies on teachers' understanding, participation, and support for change (Hallinger, 2011) as teachers' views have a significant impact on the implementation of educational reform. However, few attempts have been made to build a structural understanding of teachers' attitudes, intentions, and practices regarding formative assessment. In other words, there is limited knowledge about the factors contributing to the formation of teachers' intentions to conduct formative assessment as well as the influences of attitudinal factors on teachers' formative assessment practices. The present study aims to fill this gap by exploring the relationships among teachers' attitudes, intentions, and practices regarding formative assessment under the framework of the Theory of Planned Behaviour (TPB).

1.1. Literature review

Summative assessment is the practice of collecting information with a view to summarising how much learning has taken place. On the other hand, formative assessment is defined by Black and Wiliam (1998a) as “encompassing all those activities undertaken by teachers, and/or by their students, which provide information to be used as feedback to modify the teaching and learning activities in which they are engaged” (p. 7). It emphasises the learning process and is usually conducted on a daily basis.

Formative assessment is well believed to be productive in optimising teaching practice in ways that support student learning. Plenty of evidence can be found in literature that formative assessment practices can result in improved student achievement and reduce the achievement gap among students. For example, in Hattie's (2009, 2012) research on “visible learning”, formative assessment was rated as one of the most effective methods, having a visible effect on student achievement. Wiliam et al. (2004) also found that integration of formative assessment into teaching results in enhanced student learning performance. In a review of empirical studies concerned with classroom assessment, Black and Wiliam (1998a) reported consistent learning gains with surprisingly large effect sizes for students when assessment practices were well designed and used in a formative approach.

The major principles of formative assessment – identifying students' weaknesses and strengths, enhancing students' motivation and metacognition, providing feedback to inform teaching and learning – are well recognised in their capacity for improving students' learning (Black & Wiliam, 1998a; Wiliam et al., 2004). Both teachers and students can benefit from formative assessment by acquiring learning data which can be used to support personalised learning.

Although formative assessment is well accepted with regard to enhancing teaching and learning, it is a demanding task for teachers due to the uncertainty and flexibility of formative assessment (Bell & Cowie, 2001). Black and Wiliam (1998b) also stated that formative assessment is by no means a simple matter and “there is no ‘quick fix’ that can be added to existing practice with promise of rapid reward” (p. 15). Teaching is a highly personal activity where teachers enact their educational philosophies and make sense of notions of curriculum and assessment (Harrison, 2013). Therefore, attitudinal and cognitive factors may have important impacts on teachers' teaching practices in the classroom.

Researchers have done impressive studies assessing teachers' attitudes and practices regarding assessment. However, most studies have focused on only one aspect of assessment (i.e., attitudes or practices) (e.g., Brown, 2004; Brown et al., 2011; Dixon & Haigh, 2009; Wong, 2014). Other research has studied both teachers' attitudes and practices regarding assessment but failed to investigate the correlation between these variables under a sound theoretical framework (e.g., Brown, Kennedy, Fok, Chan, & Yu, 2009; Büyükkarçı, 2014; Duwairi, 2013).

1.2. Theory of planned behaviour

The TPB proposed by Ajzen (1985, 1991) is a rigorous theoretical framework which has the potential to provide prediction and explanation of teachers' intentions to and practice of formative assessment. TPB has been applied successfully in attempts to provide a better interpretation of diverse behaviours in western settings (Armitage & Conner, 2001; Kersaint, Lewis, Potter, & Meisels, 2007; Lipnevich, MacCann, Krumm, Burrus, & Roberts, 2011; MacFarlane & Woolfson, 2013) and the Hong Kong context (Dodgson, Henly, Duckett, & Tarrant, 2003; Mok & Lee, 2013; Yan & Sin, 2014). TPB outlines relationships among attitude, subjective norms, perceived behavioural control, intention, and practice of a particular behaviour. According to TPB theory, three determinants – including attitude towards the behaviour, subjective norms, and perceived behavioural control – exert their effects on behaviour through intentions (Ajzen, 1991). Generally, those with a favourable attitude, positive subjective norms, and high level of perceived behavioural control will more likely have the intention to perform the behaviour. The level of intention and the degree of perceived behavioural control will determine the individual's actual behaviour. The theoretical model of TPB is presented in Fig. 1.

Attitude towards the behaviour is defined as the personal orientation towards performing the behaviour and that orientation often contains two components: affective and instrumental attitude (Ajzen, 1991, 2002a). The affective attitude incorporates feelings or emotions arising from the prospect of performing the behaviour; while instrumental attitude carries an appraisal of the consequences of performing the behaviour. Subjective norm refers to perceived social pressure from significant others to perform (or not perform) the behaviour. Perceived behavioural control refers to one's perception of the difficulty of and control over performing the behaviour. Self-efficacy is a widely used indicator of perceived difficulty. Ajzen (2002a) suggested that a behaviour's controllability, which refers to people's beliefs that they have control over the behaviour, is another important indicator of perceived behavioural control. A meta-analysis on 11 empirical studies applying TPB also supported the distinction between self-efficacy and controllability across a broad range of behaviours (Trafimow, Sheeran, Conner, & Finlay, 2002).

1.3. Aims of the study

This study aims at examining the extent to which TPB can predict and explain teachers' intentions to and practices of formative assessment in the classroom. The following two specific hypotheses are tested:

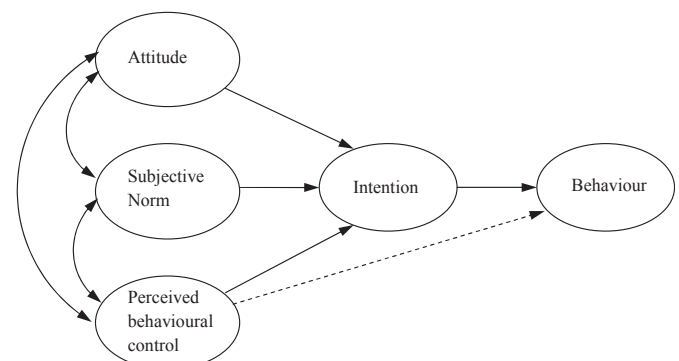


Fig. 1. The model of theory of planned behaviour (Ajzen, 1991).

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